

EDUCATION & CHILDREN SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

WEDNESDAY, 14TH MARCH, 2018

PRESENT: Councillor D. Price [Chair]

Councillors:

K.V. Broom, B.W. Jones, D. Jones, G.R. Jones, M.J.A. Lewis, S. Najmi,
E.M.J.G. Schiavone, B. Thomas, E.G. Thomas and D.T. Williams

Mrs V. Kenny – Roman Catholic Church Representative
Mrs J. Voyle-Williams – Church in Wales Representative
Mrs A. Pickles – Parent Governor [Carmarthen Area]

Also in attendance:

Councillor G. Davies, Executive Board Member for Education & Children

Also present as Observers:

Mr H. Watkins and Mr J. Cooper from Estyn

The following Officers were in attendance:

Mr G. Morgans	-	Director of Education & Children's Services
Ms E. Forsyth	-	Head of School Effectiveness/Principal Challenge Adviser
Mr A. Morgan	-	Head of Education Services
Mr A. Rees	-	Head of Curriculum & Wellbeing
Mr S. Smith	-	Head of Children's Services
Mr D. Astins	-	Strategic Development Manager
Mr S. Davies	-	Modernisation Services Manager
Ms S. Crowther	-	Elective Home Education Advisor
Ms S. Nolan	-	Group Accountant
Mrs M. Evans Thomas	-	Principal Democratic Services Officer

Chamber, County Hall, Carmarthen : 10.00 a.m. - 12.50 p.m.

1. APOLOGIES FOR ABSENCE

Apologies for absence were received from Councillors L. Bowen and I.W. Davies.

2. DECLARATIONS OF PERSONAL INTEREST

Councillor	Minute Item(s)	Nature of Interest
G. Jones	5 – Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring Report 2017/18	His wife works in the Education Department
G. Jones	6 – Welsh Government Categorisation Report 2017/18	His wife works in the Education Department
G. Jones	7 – Elective Home Education Update – March 2018	His wife works in the Education Department

3. DECLARATIONS OF PROHIBITED PARTY WHIPS

There were no declarations of prohibited party whips.

4. PUBLIC QUESTIONS

The Chair advised that no public questions had been received.

5. REVENUE AND CAPITAL BUDGET MONITORING REPORT 2017/18

[NOTE: Councillor G. Jones had previously declared an interest in this item.]

The Committee considered the Revenue and Capital Budget Monitoring Report in relation to the Education and Children Service which provided an update on the latest budgetary position as at 31st December, 2017, in respect of the 2017/18 financial year.

The Education and Children Service was projecting an overspend of £516k on the revenue budget and a net variance of £2,004k against the 2017/18 approved capital budget.

The following questions/observations were raised on the report:-

- With regard to school redundancy and EVR, officers were asked when the Committee would be able to see specific plans for dealing with this issue. The Director of Education & Children explained that officers have been working on this for 3-4 years and he was pleased that what has been put in place is having an impact as expenditure has been reduced by half this year. He referred to the Challenge Review which supports schools to make the right decisions at the right time. Natural retirement is encouraged, however, there will always be an element of redundancy which the Authority will have to bear the cost of;
- Reference was made to the Music Service and officers were asked if there was a real threat to the service and if so, what can be done to retain it. The Director of Education & Children explained that it was a financial challenge as it is funded by schools through a SLA and they are having to make tough decisions. The Welsh Government has considered allocating £2m to look at the provision of music services throughout Wales, but this requires further confirmation. He agreed that it was a challenge and more and more schools are using the service to teach music rather than to learn how to play a musical instrument. The Head of Curriculum and Wellbeing stressed the importance of increasing income and reducing costs;
- Officers were asked about the special education posts which have not been filled and the Director of Education & Children informed the Committee that there is a high number of staff in the Education Department and when a post becomes vacant, officers ascertain whether it needs to be filled. They also encounter problems recruiting to some post such as sensory impairment. Work is being done in this regard as a high number of staff in this specialised field are approaching retirement age;
- Concern was expressed regarding the provision of respite and holiday care and the Head of Children's Services explained that regular meetings are held with the 3rd sector to see if they are better placed to provide these

services as sometimes Local Authorities provide services that are far more intense than families require. It is all about realigning services and providing what families need, with regular communication with families and providers;

- Concern was expressed over the reduction in demand for school meals and officers were asked what is being done to mitigate the increase in cost in April. The Strategic Development Manager explained that the general trend has been one of the take up of school meals holding up until last year, where it declined by around 1% and the data this year shows a further decline. This could be due to a number of reasons e.g. parents getting accustomed to the new online payment system, however, there was no obvious trend. With regard to the increase in cost, the Executive Board Member for Education and Children advised the Committee that the price of school meals has increased by 10p most years and now Carmarthenshire is the highest priced in Wales and he was concerned that the price was contributing towards the reduction in take up. He was therefore working with officers to find a way to avoid increasing the cost and he was hopeful that this could be done;
- Officers were congratulated on reducing the overspend between September and December and were asked whether they had any idea about the end of year position. The Group Accountant advised that she did not have an up-to-date figure as officers were currently going through the reports from budget managers for February. The Director advised the Committee that he would like to get as close to a zero position as possible. He added that his officers are very successful in attracting and making the most of grants, every vacant post is looked at and whether there is a need to fill it and the department's work practices are improving with the help of the TIC programme.

RESOLVED

5.1 that the report be received;

5.2 that the Committee receive a report later in the year on School Redundancy and EVR detailing the approach taken and the progress made;

5.3 that the Committee receive a report at a future meeting on the recruitment and retention of staff;

5.4 that the Committee receive a report at a future meeting on the problems being faced by the county's Music Service.

6. WELSH GOVERNMENT CATEGORISATION REPORT (CARMARTHENSHIRE OUTCOMES) 2017/18

[NOTE: Councillor G. Jones had previously declared an interest in this item.]

The Committee considered the Welsh Government Categorisation Report (Carmarthenshire Outcomes) 2017/18.

In 2014 the National School Categorisation System placed schools into one of four colour-coded support categories to demonstrate the level of support they need –

green, yellow, amber and red. Each support category denotes a varying amount of tailored, bespoke support for the individual school e.g. green schools receive up to 4 days support while red schools receive up to 25 days of support.

The National School Categorisation System has been developed by the Welsh Government and regional consortia, of which Carmarthenshire and all Local Authorities are key partners. The main purpose of the system is to identify the schools that need the most support across Wales.

The report provided a detailed overview of the outcomes for the 2017/18 round of national categorisation and data demonstrating each school's national categorisation support and improvement journey since 2014.

The 2017/18 round of national categorisation has witnessed a significant and welcome change within the process with the previous 'Standards' grouping (1 to 4) for schools being deleted.

The following questions/observations were raised on the report:-

- Asked if problems are still being encountered in appointing in rural schools, the Head of Education Services conceded that recruitment is hard on many levels and advertising for a school of less than 50 pupils is a challenge. He added that is not just a problem in Carmarthen-shire, it is a national problem;
- Asked how many schools individual Challenge Advisers are responsible for and whether they are of a high enough standard and also if they will be working under the umbrella of ERW or the Council in the future, the Head of Education Services stated that we do need more Challenge Advisers. They should work with no more than 10 schools on average, however, they have to work with more out of necessity and that was a concern. If we had less schools we could provide a stronger service. ERW was currently undergoing a review and he reassured the Committee that officers are working hard to ensure that the Carmarthenshire has an input into the review. With regard to the question about whether Challenge Advisers are of a high enough standard, the Principal Challenge Adviser explained that the team accesses a wide range of training and they work closely in partnership with Estyn to ensure that training is received from all aspects. The team is strong and that is why improvements are being seen.

RESOLVED that the report be received.

7. ELECTIVE HOME EDUCATION UPDATE - MARCH 2018.

[NOTE: Councillor G. Jones had previously declared an interest in this item.]

The Committee was informed that Elective Home Education is where parents or guardians decide to provide home-based education for their children instead of sending them to school. It is not home tuition provided by the Local Education Authority or where a Local Education Authority provides education otherwise than at school.

The Local Authority recognises that elective home education is an aspect of parental choice and therefore aims to encourage good practice in its relationships

with home educators. This is achieved by clearly setting out the policy landscape and by providing information and advice on the roles and responsibilities of the Local Authority and parents in relation to children educated at home.

Parents may choose to exercise their right to educate their children at home and may do so for a variety of reasons. The reasons themselves should not have any bearing on the Local Authority's treatment of families who home educate, since our prime interest lies in the parents' educational provision for their children.

Officers seek to build effective relationships with home educators to safeguard the educational interest and welfare of the children and young people. Parents who are, or who are considering, home educating are provided with a named contact within the Authority who is familiar with home education policy and practice and has an understanding of the relevant legislation and a range of educational philosophies.

While there is no legal framework for the Local Authority to regularly monitor provision of home education, officers are conscious of the Authority's wider duties of care and will contact parents to discuss their ongoing home education provision. The Local Authority is mindful of new Welsh Government non-statutory guidance published in January 2017 which provides a basis for our approach.

The Local Authority is not legally obliged to provide any resources for children and young people educated at home, however, we shall:-

- provide advice and support on curriculum matters;
- provide information on organisations which support home educators;
- facilitate access to some services e.g. careers, counselling.

The Local Authority has established a database for children educated at home. All schools will be required to notify the appropriate officer of a parent's intention to home educate and a record of visits is kept by the officer responsible for this area of work.

The following questions/observations were raised on the report:-

- Concern was expressed that parents may have the right to choose the education for their children, however, the Authority has certain duties. The Elective Home Education Adviser explained that there is no specific legal duty to assess but the Local Authority has a statutory duty to make arrangements to enable them to establish the identities, so far as it is possible to do so, of children in their area who are not receiving a suitable education. She added that the difficulty lies in the interpretation of what is a "suitable education". The Head of Curriculum & Wellbeing stated that a clearer commitment from Welsh Government would be of great help as we have a moral duty in this regard;
- Reference was made to the importance of social skills and concern was expressed that children who are home educated might miss out the social aspect of school life;
- Reference was made to the 15% of children who leave the education system because of bullying and officers were asked how Carmarthenshire compares with other counties and what are we doing about bullying. The Head of Curriculum & Wellbeing explained that any accusation of bullying is

investigated. In this regard he welcomed the focus on wellbeing being introduced into the curriculum. The Head of Education Services informed the Committee that Carmarthenshire has for many years been blazing a trail on work in this area. Officers try to encourage positive behaviour and early intervention rather than having an anti-bullying policy;

- Reference was made to the fact that flexi schooling can be very successful, however, it does cause problems for schools in terms of the effect on attendance figure. The Director explained that all Authorities are in the process of collecting data so that it can be compared. A package of support is also being developed. At the moment there is no funding available to support this group of children. Schools have been penalised in the past for allowing flexi schooling because of the effect on attendance. Officers are in discussions with Welsh Government on developing a Code for Flexi Schooling as this would benefit both the child and the school;
- Concern was expressed that the Authority appears to have no control over children who are being home schooled and whether they are learning and officers were asked if it would be possible to get some sort of standardisation for home schooling and whether the Welsh Government could be made aware of the Committee's concerns in this regard;
- Asked whether there was any data available in relation to examination pass rates for those children who were home educated. The Director explained that it was difficult because there are complications with the current system surrounding access to examination centres by children who are home schooled.

RESOLVED

7.1 that the report be received;

7.2 that the Committee receive a report at a future meeting regarding the positive behaviour approaches being implemented by the Authority in relation to bullying;

7.3 that officers draft a letter to the Welsh Government expressing the Committee's concerns with regard to the problems being experienced with home schooled and flexi schooled children, for approval by the Committee prior to despatch.

8. EDUCATION & CHILDREN SCRUTIINY COMMITTEE TASK AND FINISH GROUP 2017/18 - PLANNING AND SCOPING DOCUMENT

The Chair reminded the Committee that, following a request for suggestions from members for potential Task & Finish projects, the Committee had considered a number of suggestions and had agreed to review Early Years Play and Education.

The Committee's discussions relating to the key aims and objectives for the Task and Finish review were captured and developed into a draft planning and scoping document, which included the aims and scope of the review, and was being presented to Committee for consideration and endorsement.

The Committee was also required to agree which members should sit on the Task & Finish Group, which should consist of up to 6 members on a politically balanced basis.

Officers were working on a schedule of meetings, the first of which would be held as soon as possible when a Chair and Vice-Chair would be appointed from the membership of the Group. Officers from the Education & Children's Services Department and Democratic Services Unit will support the work of the Task & Finish Group.

RESOLVED

8.1 that the Task and Finish Scoping Document be received;

8.2 that the aims and scope of the work of the Task and Finish Group be endorsed;

8.3 that the membership of the Task and Finish Group be as follows:-

- **Councillor Kim Broom**
- **Councillor Dot Jones**
- **Councillor Jean Lewis**
- **Councillor Darren Price**
- **Councillor Bill Thomas**
- **Councillor Edward Thomas**

9. EXPLANATION FOR NON-SUBMISSION OF SCRUTINY REPORTS

The Committee noted the reasons for the non-submission of the following reports:-

- ALN Reform including SEN
- Quarter 3 Performance Management Report for the Council's 2017/18 Wellbeing Objectives

RESOLVED that the information be noted.

10. FORTHCOMING ITEMS

RESOLVED that the list of forthcoming items to be considered at the next scheduled meeting to be held on 23rd April, 2018 be noted.

11. MINUTES - 25TH JANUARY, 2018

RESOLVED that the minutes of the meeting of the Committee held on 25th January, 2018 be signed as a correct record.

CHAIR

DATE